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ABSTRACT

Eduardo Galeano's "Memory of Fire: Genesis" raises a number of questions concerning the "politics of location," a term that may be defined as the intersections, tensions, and complications that people of color bring to space and what space means in terms of hierarchies and power, racial and gender stratifications. Text can also be a fluid, contested space--one which can articulate something about people's "position in the hierarchy of power." A composition instructor, interested in unmasking certain hierarchies of power not only as these hierarchies operate in the classroom but also as they manifest themselves in an institution like the University of Michigan, is also committed to teaching writing skills. In a pre-Freshman Composition course concentrating on issues of ethnicity and race, students (most of them Latino and African American), however, began to raise questions about the apparent contradiction between a course that, on the one hand, encourages students to engage in oppositional behaviors but then, on the other hand, teaches traditional, oppositional modes of writing. While the negotiation of this tension was difficult, it was successful, however hard it may be in retrospect to figure out why and how it was so. The course used portfolios for assessing student writing. Excerpts from several papers written by one student illustrate the complex, advanced way he worked through problems of ethnicity, language, culture and values. (TB)

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"The Politics of Location": Text as Opposition

ED 386 728

I open this presentation with a quote from the historian, Eduardo Galeano, one of my most favorite writers because he raises important issues in ways that complicate his "text." This quote comes from *Memory of Fire: Genesis,* which is part of a trilogy that he wrote on the history of the Americas; Galeano writes,

1666: New Amsterdam
New York

> With a few shots from their guns the English bring down the flag that waves over the fortress and seize the island of Manhattan from the Dutch, who had bought it from the Delaware Indians for sixty florins.
>
> Recalling the arrival of the Dutch over half a century ago, the Delawares say: *The great man wanted only a little, little land, on which to raise greens for his soup, just as much as a bullock's hide would cover. Here we first might have observed their deceitful spirit.*
>
> New Amsterdam, the most important slave market in North America, now becomes New York; and Wall Street is named after the wall built to stop blacks from escaping.

This quote raises some issues about "the politics of location" with which my presentation is concerned. I am going to define what I mean by "the politics of location" later, but I use this concept to talk about the intersections, tensions and complications of not only what we, as people of color, bring to a space, but what the space means in terms of hierarchies and power, racial and gender stratifications. I want to suggest that ideologies circumscribe a "location" in concrete, physical terms and play themselves out in complicated power relations between people and places. For example, in "a close reading" of Galeano's text, we might first think about location, New Amsterdam which becomes New York, as a fluid yet contested site. It first "belongs" to the Delawares, who "sell" it to the Dutch, who surrender it to the English. This location is a possession, something to be bartered for and sold or perhaps more accurately taken or seized during conflict . New Amsterdam/New

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York is a location that is configured into a European commodity culture in terms of ownership, which only gets more complicated when bodies–Indian and Black bodies–enter that place.

In his telling of history, this is the complication–the presence of Indian and Black bodies–that Galeano wants us to think about. This is the complication that his prose style calls attention to, disturbing the text with bodies--"the disruptive remembering presence," as Toni Morrison would describe, of Indian and Black bodies, of what those bodies "own" and of what can be taken away. But Galeano also disrupts the text with signifers that are in flux (New Amsterdam and then New York) and with systems that are fixed (wall and Wall Street) but that resonate with multiple meanings (like capitalism and the slave trade).

Something else that comes to mind when I think about Galeano's quote is the slave burial ground that was discovered in New York about a year or so ago. I was listening to a story on NPR about a competition to build a memorial on the site of the burial ground. What is interesting to me was a comment made by one of the historians judging the entries for the memorial. I don't recall her name, but she said two important things, first, that the discovery of the site itself will change history, specifically, the way we think about slavery. She said that slavery often is one of those instituitions identified with the south, but that the discovery of burial grounds will make us remember that slavery was very much a northern institution as well. And as Galeano suggests, Wall Street, the wall build to prevent slaves from escaping, is a concrete physical site upon which capitalism was built. The discovery of the burial ground itself becomes a way to rewrite history, much like Galeano is doing. The second important point that she made was how much the process of discovering the site and creating a memorial to it is about memory. Again, I would call this burial ground "a disruptive remembering presence" because she went on to talk about the winning memorial design as one that kept the judges coming back time and time again; as she described it, the memorial would serve as a way to haunt the site, to make the burial ground linger in people's memories.

Galeano also disrupts history by evoking memory in his text --by the signifiers of blacks, slave and slave market, wall and Wall Street. Again through his disruptive text, Galeano does not want us to forget or more accurately reminds us of important "facts" about what this location means in terms of commodity (culture) and the commodification of black people's bodies. By framing this presentation in the ways with which I do here, that is, by thinking about the politics of location, there is something I too do not wish to forget--nor that I want my listeners to forget--that colored bodies (and all that those bodies and minds *do*) are marked in commodity culture as possessions; that our resistance/opposition is concerned with this aspect of commodity culture, especially with this culture's degradation of its "possessions" and how systematic/systemic degradation and the resulting pain constructs both knowledge and culture, influencing how we interact with systems and institutions.

Thus, the term, "the politics of location" also resonates with multiple meanings for my purposes. For I am borrowing the term from another historian, Robin D. G. Kelley, and by the politics of location Kelley means, "the racialized and gendered social spaces of work and community [and colored peoples'] position in the hierarchy of power, the ensemble of social relations...." But I am also using the term to mean actual, physical locations--like New York, like Wall Street, like institutions, like schools and classrooms *and* people's relationships to them. Kelley goes on to argue, "Feminist scholarship on the South and some community histories have begun to examine how the social spaces in which people work (in addition to the world beyond work, which was also divided by race and, at times, sex) shaped the character of everyday resistance, collective action, *and domination"* (96). In other words, what Kelley suggests by the term and what I am borrowing is how certain locations (of both the physical and social kind) are circumscribed by both hierarchies of power (of race and class and gender) *and* resistance--in other words, I want to explore how people of color interact with these hierarchies as these get manifested in certain locations.

I am interested in people's relationship to institutional spaces--schools and classrooms, especially--and in people's relationship to texts that are produced in institutional spaces. For me, text is also a location. And as I will argue, text can also be a fluid, contested space--one which can articulate something about people's "position in the hierarchy of power" and one which can also serve to replicate those hierarchies. I will develop examples of what I mean later in this presentation, but I want to suggest that writing and the texts that gets produced in classrooms, for example, can serve as a means by which certain hierarchies get explored and unmasked and can also serve to secure them.

I am going to look at, because of time constraints, an essay, written by a Latino student, Raymundo, for a class in the English Composition Board that the University of Michigan considers a pre-composition course. This writing course, which I taught, was "content-based" focusing on Race and Ethnicity. In this course, we were concerned with exploring and unmasking power relations as they played themselves out in terms of students' own lives; for example, we read a lot of different articles about neighborhoods and violence and music and popular culture. But early in the semester, I became aware that the kinds of tasks I was asking students to perform required a dual interpretation on their part. This could have gone unexplored if I had not been also talking in explicit terms about hierarchies and students' own position in those hierarchies, which had to include exploring their relationship to the University of Michigan and my relationship, as a representative (of sorts) of the institution, to them

On the one hand, as a teacher, I am committed to unmasking certain hierarchies of power not only as these hierarchies operate in my classroom but also as they manifest themselves in an institution like the U of M. On the other hand, I am also committed to teaching certain writing skills, like getting students to write their papers using "Standard Academic English" and getting them to write academic arguments, which at the U of M is a highly valued mode of writing. Incidently, we often talk about argument as if we know exactly what that mode or genre is. But as I have been thinking about it, I realize that the

genre is much more slippery. And as I think Galeano, Morrison and Kelley would say, when we think about the politics of location or the disruptive remembering presence of the bodies of people of color this genre can end up revealing a lot of tensions.

I will quickly tell this story about a conversation that we had in class which is an example of the kind of tension I am talking about. We had been reading a short chapter from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, a chapter in which he talks about particular schooling practices that erased students' native languages and replaced them with English. A student, Torrey, made the connection that day between what he called "robbing people of their voice" as Ngugi describes and what happens in school, what was happening when I asked the students to write "academic arguments." Incidently, Torrey was reading an article summarizing the court case "Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary v. Ann Arbor School District" from an edited collection called *Language Loyalties*. He summarized the key points of the case for the class, saying at the end, "Ms. Moreno, if they are right, you should value our voices because it isn't right to impose one language over another. Like Black English should be respected as much as arguments we write in class. You should value our voice." The rest of his classmates nodded in agreement. And while I did have a response to Torrey, his point exposed some of the tensions that we were feeling as a class between the things we were reading and talking about and the writing tasks they had to do.

Because the course focused on race and ethnicity, the majority of the students enrolled were Latino and African American, which in a lot of ways was realizing a goal of mine, to teach predominately students of color; to construct my classroom around their concerns and their interests; and to provide them with a "safe" space (however institutionalized) in which to explore these concerns and interests. In other words, as much as I could, as a teacher, I wanted to create an oppositional space within an institution like the U of M. So maybe you can begin to see how "the politics of location" became an important concept to think about as I taught this course--how many different tensions were

surfacing in this classroom as a result of engaging in "oppositional behaviors" yet teaching traditional, academic modes of writing.

Nowhere were those tensions more apparent than in the portfolios students created. The English Composition Board is one of the few spaces at the U of M that uses portfolios to assess students' writing. Assessing the portfolios is a really complicated process and there is a lot of thought that we put into our work with assessment at ECB. One of the most valuable aspects of the portfolio system, for me, is how it is necessary to assess students' written texts based on several pieces of writing instead of one; in this way, the portfolio itself is a kind of extended argument. My language to describe the portfolio is oftentimes metaphorical and referential; in that, I think again about how Galeano, Morrison, and Kelley frame my perspective of the portfolios, the ways in which their arguments require that I think about the intersections of bodies with texts when I read the portfolios.

Yet, at the ECB we still require certain "traditional and academic" modes of writing in the portfolios--an argument paper, an in-class essay (usually a timed writing), a personal essay, and a reflective piece (a piece describing both the contents of the portfolio and an assessment of students' own writing.) There is still the potential, given these modes of writing, to have students construct portfolios that erase them and that reflect certain institutional values. My job as a teacher, whose goal was to create an oppositional and safe space yet one clearly grounded in an institutional location, was to negotiate myself and the students through what seemed like impossible dualities.

It may seem like I was setting up a very difficult situation, but I think the negotiation was successful. And although I am still trying to figure out what happened to us over the course of the semester, I do have a very rich body of texts, a collection of students voices, which in some ways document how we found our way through and which in a lot of other ways become a story not only about the course but how students "found their voices." I will share the titles from the four papers that Raymundo included in his portfolio; his titles reflect that intersection of bodies with text because that is what he writes

about and say something about how he negotiated "the politics of location." He is writing about what it means to have Spanish as his first language and the linguistic violence he faced in school in his "argument paper" called, The Bashing of Unity: Language versus Family. He is writing about how important it is for him to hold on tightly to his language and to recognize how important it is to respect other languages, like Black English, in his second essay (an in-class, timed writing) based on an interview with the rapper, Ice-T. This piece is called, More Ways of Destroying Us; and in this essay, he is writing about the connections between the materiality of people's lives and their language and their culture. He is also writing about his growing awareness of his own precarious position in this society in his third paper, a "personal essay," called Establishing Oneself. And his final text in the portfolio is a reflective piece of writing in which he assesses his own development as a writer called, It Takes Time, and in which he talks about the difficulties and triumphs of his own writing.

Raymundo readily identities language and culture as intertwined, things not easily separated. One of the arguments that he was developing for himself in the course, in his writing as well as in the conversations that we had as a class, was that language reflects culture and that if a system of domination takes away one's language, one's culture is also destroyed. This argument is expressed in his first paper, in a section he subtitles Language:

> Coming from a Spanish speaking family, the English language was hard for me to learn at the age of eight. I could have practically starved if I didn't know the phrase, "I'm hungry!" It was as if my language was being suppressed. This English language was forcing me to say *I, Me, and Mine* which are prime examples of individualism. Like Ngugi, the English language was forcing me to stand outside myself to look at myself. Slowly but surely our community was being conquered. The theme of cooperation as the ultimate good in a community was being destroyed. In Kenya, the colonizers accomplished what they wanted by destroying the Kenyan's culture and philosophy. The only difference between Kenya and Texas was location because at the end the systems of domination were still using the same techniques.
>
> The world I was now living in was trying to change me. Were they succeeding? Yes, to a certain extent. I'm still strong about my culture's beliefs, only now I'm trying to adapt to the whole world in general. I'm more open minded about subjects like sex than my father is. Still, others have been completely dissolved by the English culture. One of my cousins, like Leopold Sedar Sengar, a Kenyan, accepted the English ways, and the result? [My cousin] turned on us like

> a complete traitor. He acted like the school mates of Ngugi who turned in each other for speaking their native tongues. My family and I are at the moment trying to rehabilitate [my cousin] since now he's having suicidal tendencies. These systems of domination are winning some battles but they have lost some too. This war will never end.

Raymundo's text is very complicated in the ways that he is connecting language with philosophies and values, and language with culture, and these ideas with specific examples from the chapter he read. As a writing teacher, this is the sort of complicated text I want students to write and in a lot ways push them to write. I would also call this text oppositional in the ways in which Raymundo carves for himself–his language, his cultural and familial values–a subject position. He has an argument, one that is clearly stated–if you lose your language, or more importantly if you allow it to be taken away, then you will lose your culture and possibly your life, as the example about his cousin illustrates.

I am going to conclude this presentation with the final point that Raymundo writes about in his essay. At the end, he articulates an important point about loss and on-going struggle, and he comes to a conclusion in a section he subtitles, Struggle, which I think makes clear what he spent most of the semester developing. Although the dominant English language and dominant culture intentionally seeks to "bash communal cultures" like Mexicano culture, it is important to recognize that there are locations dominant society cannot touch; he writes:

> Ngugi has done us all a favor by reminding us that family unity is important. *I love my family to the death!* Up to this point, everything I do is for the welfare of the family. My getting an education at Michigan is for obtaining a highly paid job to support my family. Today's times are one when labor is hard to find since technology is wiping out human labor tasks with machinery. When Ngugi said that cooperation was the ultimate good of a community, the memories of working on the fields popped into my head. Just this summer, we were working on the sugar beet fields of Minnesota. Even though it was hard labor, I spent twelve hours a day working with my family. Once on the fields, family issues were discussed such as our goals or plans for vacation in Mexico. Now I miss them and feel lost without them, but I must continue at this University, *"!Por la familia!"*